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SAA

*Helsinki*





# *HELSINKI*

SELECTED POEMS OF

*Pentti Saarikoski*

TRANSLATED BY ANSELM HOLLO



***Rapp & Carroll*** London

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HELSINKI

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## INTRODUCTION

'As I left the poetry reading and started walking along Oxford Street, looking at the shop windows, the people, the red double-decker buses, the cubist taxicabs, and at everything, I suddenly felt I had had enough of "poetry": anywhere, everywhere in the world, in all the languages, there was poetry poetry poetry—yet it was so invisible, it did not survive the width of one street, one noise-filled canyon; it was so feeble, so timid, so blind. I remembered how, a long time ago, at school, I sat and wrote poems during the German lessons, certain that i I I should become, whatever, and looked out at the trees and church spires in St John's Park outside the school and tried to see that God whom I would have to vanquish before I could become whatever it was I wanted to become; and now I was walking in Oxford Street, knowing that God was dead, and that all this poetry was about the death of God.'

Pentti Saarikoski wrote these reflections four or five years ago after a stay in London on his way back from Dublin, where he had spent several months working on his Finnish translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (which appeared in 1964). In the light of his own poems and other writings it becomes obvious that the remarks can not be interpreted as a plea for the abolition of poetry, or as an admission of defeat: he has in fact published three collections since then. The 'failure' he accuses 'poetry' of (and he uses the English word in his Finnish text) is not so much ivory-towerism, or modernistic arrogance towards the hypothetical reader/listener, as its floundering in the shallows of self-importance, in the confused, self-inflicted dichotomy of 'private' and

'public' that is so obvious in the work of a great number of poets, both European and American, who are published and regarded as 'what is/going on' . . . many of them younger than Saarikoski himself (he was born in 1937). Despite his Marxist convictions, Saarikoski does not share the facile optimism and populism of a Yevtushenko, or the often equally facile tendency to audience-wooing in the manner of Vachel Lindsay (or Dylan Thomas, for that matter) of a Voznesensky; and despite his awareness of the need for communication, and his own penchant for public activity, he does not short-circuit his energies by falling back on some mode of easy familiarity that might just divert the attention of an audience for a moment from the latest Top Twenty constellation in more popular areas of life. He simply does not have a private and a public voice: like Tadeusz Rózewicz of Poland, whom he might well be compared to in a number of fundamental attitudes, he seems to have decided that if it is possible to speak at all, in poems or otherwise, it is equally possible, not to say imperative, to speak about *everything* that has a bearing on one's life without dividing that life and one's manner of speaking about it into compartments furnished with the literary, 'cultural', aesthetic notions of a ruined and decaying society. It is exactly this that caused bewilderment and antagonism in those critics, of the political Left as well as of the Right, who felt themselves to be representatives of the general public in terms of taste and tradition when Saarikoski's first books appeared in Finland in the late fifties. Ironically, the greatest stir was over a book of translations of the very few and extremely fragmentary works of Hipponax, the pre-Homeric Greek poet—a collection of a quality, style and scholarship equal to Guy Davenport's recent *Carmina Archilochi* (California University Press, 1964). Hipponax's frankness and funkiness proved too much for those members of Finland's cultural élite who had been brought up on a Teutonic plaster-cast version of Hellas; some of whom even went as far as to accuse Saarikoski of having *invented* the glorious old 'Horse Prince'.

From its beginnings—influenced by reading of both the Imagists and the Greek Anthology; through the second stage, the word-mobiles of 'What Is/Going On?'; to the recent, more relaxed and, in terms of syntactical structure, more explicit manner of poems such as 'Helsinki', and the dream-like post-Surrealism

of his last book *Song/by Song/Away*, a sequence of love poems to a 'dark lady'—Saarikoski's poetry has never proposed any soothing 'coherences', blueprints for groups or movements (though he has attracted his share of imitators), or closed systems of personal projection. His position as the most-talked-about and best-known poet of his generation in Finland, as well as his growing reputation abroad (so far, translations have appeared in Swedish, German, French, Russian and Spanish) are perhaps due to the intellectual and imaginative power to change, to avoid all repetitiveness, to operate on a constantly demanding level, while at the same time creating an unmistakable 'mind-sound' which gives the reader a pretty well-definable idea of the mind he is attending to and lets him, as it were, 'in' on its workings—provided that the poems are not approached with 19th century 'literary' prejudices. It is not for me to curtail the effectiveness of these poems by giving a thumbnail sketch of that mind: from my own experience of it I should only like to say that it seems to be one of the few I know that are truly of our time, of these fifties, sixties, we hope, seventies—when we shall have to reinstate the human being and its needs in the world and in the world's thinking and writing above all metaphysical and idealistic cadavers and pseudo-problems; or, otherwise, end in the greatest, final pseudo-event of them all. What Saarikoski says to me is that we are all involved in the politics of the human being—and questions of 'commitment', i.e. self-conscious and therefore always superficial involvement, become irrelevant at his level of discourse and may be clearly seen as obstructions to the intelligent and useful practice of the art of speech and vision.

ANSELM HOLLO



## *The Madman's Horse*

I bought a horse from a madman.  
He had drawn it himself  
and it was a regular horse  
but for the eyes: they were in its nostrils.  
Still, that was  
intentional: that people would see  
how mad he was, and buy more drawings.  
I bought it. I thought of the horse,  
thought of it standing, among the pine-trees  
in the evening, when the sun's ears  
are streaming with blood.

crash  
and the door flew  
off its hinges  
my hat too

too bad sir  
you'll have to wait  
    until the autumn  
too bad the misses  
have to leave  
their needlework  
and the ladies  
their Singer machines too bad  
we can't have the banquet and ball  
impossible  
in this wind

such stupid doors sir  
doors that don't last  
the summer out  
however  
soon we won't need a door

they have taken the horses  
sir there they stand  
at the edge of the wood  
and now they have riders  
and the riders have rifles

well i am leaving  
said the chambermaid  
but i calmed her down  
only the gentlefolk  
i told her  
only the gentlefolk get killed  
like you sir

better hurry  
now you have no peace



to end this war with  
an eternal autumn  
has been planted  
for you  
    right here

leaves gone birds flown  
the tree so light to carry  
everything ready  
for those who will come  
    to visit the past

mygod  
what are we going to do now  
said the lady  
shut up no use bawling  
said the master  
and he was right

three bearded fellows  
stood on the threshold  
no funny business they said  
that took care of the lady  
    but the whole era  
was hung by its feet  
from the chandelier  
and shot thru the navel

.

winter now  
the air is cold  
the ground is hard  
the rabbit goes hungry  
in the wood  
no food  
soon snow  
many feet high  
and what shall poor bunny do then?  
don't you think we should fix that door  
    at last  
comrade sir?

## *The Guest*

Every day now, since my wife told me to cease from  
writing poems

I've been treating myself to these American prunes;  
and she has come to see me, whose breasts  
are 'so moist and tender, you can eat them like candy'.

But when Grandpa, the miner, came back from the States  
spouting tales wild and woolly, his teeth  
slanting backwards, his pockets empty  
and said Now darling, how about building that house  
Grandma picked up her scissors and struck him through  
the heart

Life was given to man  
for him to consider  
in which position  
he wants to be dead:

Grey skies float by,  
star-meadows hang

and the earth  
comes into your mouth  
like bread.

*What is/going on?*



*this started, This started*

this started two years before the wars  
in a village now it belongs to the Soviet Union  
of the war I remember only the fires  
they were lovely  
no such fires these days  
I run to the window when fire-engines howl  
all my childhood I traveled  
I became a communist  
walked in the cemetery  
studying the angels'  
private parts  
they don't have them these days  
sella in curuli struma Nonius sedet  
burnt books in Alexandria  
impersonated a flower a stone built a church  
wrote poems to myself the chair rocked up and down  
no such high-backed chairs these days  
there is however high poetry I'm expecting a check  
    What is a mistake, the wrong turn, the right turn, no  
    the road is  $\pm 2$   
I live in times to come  
read the newspapers of tomorrow  
support Khrushchev carry the stone owl from room to room  
looking for a place to put it, This started

## *KTO KOVO KTO KOVO*

high poetry, the sun sets, the sun rises  
The Sun burns

the big guns are hollow arms without hands  
the rain falls into them

the bird that zooms down tail first  
and cries KTO KOVO KTO KOVO

is The Weapon  
the forest splits apart is a road  
is Khrushchev

no road

And what is Europe  
a frog jumps its nose caught under a stone

and:  
a church full of women  
the bull bellows a hundred bulls  
the Negro sheds his skin  
Republican Democrat join in a final embrace  
the crucified one turns in the wind  
and the world is lost if it does not turn also,  
America steering Europe by her hind legs  
and Castro a Statue of Liberty  
and:

the ideological content: shadows of deeds embracing  
the crucified one makes a jingling sound  
like a city expanding  
a pretty castle built on a child



## *120 miles from Leningrad*

Helsinki is where I live.

Helsinki is the capital of Finland.

It lies by the sea 120 miles to the west from Leningrad.

Helsinki is an expanding city, and the rents are high.

We sit here surrounded by our forests, backs turned to the giant  
and stare at his image in a well's eye. He wears a dark suit,  
white shirt, silver-grey tie. In his country everything is  
quite different, there people walk on or without their heads.

We sit here in the midst of our very own forests,  
but far away in the West there is a land where huge eyes float  
by the shore, and they can see us here.

Helsinki is in the process of reconstruction, according to the  
plans made by Mr Alvar Aalto.

*points on the circumference*

the last letter slowly unfolding  
a wreath a life-saver moving towards it  
a wheel-shaped cloud caught on a steeple

fourteen is half of seven the numbers  
are points on the circumference  
gluttons tied to the spinning table

are changes that do not occur are flowers  
exploding sky-high and the Sun burns  
the heart but not the speech from the heart

and the first letter is a bull  
charging the one that is slowly unfolding  
is the Sun is the radiant tip of cock

is a milky way for the Sun's seed  
a spinning system the bush is burning  
is happy Pythagoras traveling on

*L'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle*

I lived in a ruin the house they called The Lion  
a woman sitting on the floor  
her breasts were watching me

Zone

A woman a place of birds  
those lips down below like willow leaves  
L'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle

I was writing a righteous book of revelation  
a godless tragedy  
I had died  
a Christ pared down to the state of a fish  
and a flashing eye

*of pure practical intelligence*

First seek ye the kingdom of pure  
practical intelligence

shreds of posters and headlines  
shards of gramophone records feathers

lights shining arcs  
the well-lit borders

when the rush-hour comes  
and the hour of the pile-up  
and the sounds of breaking steel-plate and people  
are heard in the dark

when the journey is broken, no one is on the right road

*voice in the head*

voice in the head  
all afternoon  
like molten plastic the sky  
that vertical mouth  
the voice a gate I am passing through  
the tree that shelters me  
the smell is in the leaves  
like silver-needles so quick  
that I should go  
small diving  
elephants in my blood  
the smell  
goes to your head  
like incense  
and the church is built out of flesh  
on the rock named  
night and day blue soil the roots  
that I should go  
and die  
dig my elbows into the ground  
and the earth

*communication*

sunshine

a sunny day like a spacious hotel and

the star a mine adrift in the sea

an historical pageant

demonstration

blood in their shoes

communication

the streetcar went

far

away from the city

the maze of veins

you lose your way in

and the windows

you get stuck in

as you attempt to escape

An automobile lying on its back in the water

## *Pope and Czar*

I have been listening  
to my heart for a long time  
the white screen the way  
that discus-thrower moves  
the tombs of Tarquinia

Pope and Czar  
Metternich and Guizot  
The French Radicals the German police

Which people lives the way this dead one knew

UNTO ETERNAL PEACE

the black automobile  
the lion and no other beast

I have been driving  
through the white screen for a long time to my heart

*cold globules pass through the heart*

cold globules pass through the heart

I want to get out from inside you  
listen

the trees  
scratching against one another

light and warmth in the café  
or the certainty  
of a number or letter seen  
from a bus window every day

now I stand by the wall  
alone  
and the disaster cannot be averted



*not an inch*

jeder, der sich uns entgegenstellt, wird vernichtet  
wir weichen hier keinen Schritt zurück

*let's make coffee*

the smoke seems purer at night  
the wind more audible

let's make coffee

that rock jutting out of the ground like a fist  
now think about Finland  
I have been thinking about  
just about everything and now it is late  
I'm tired

sand on the bird's wing

*another country*

I love you  
as one loves another country  
the rocks  
and the bridge  
or a quiet evening  
with its smell of books  
I walk towards you  
in this world  
under the atmospheres  
passing between  
the two lights  
with my thought which is carved  
carved out of you

*the flag*

the boys were playing ice hockey  
stiff as a window the flag stood out in the wind  
the delivery van backed out of the garage  
the woman pulled back a curtain to see was it cold outside  
in the distance there was a thin layer of snow on the fields  
in the paper there was a picture of two Cabinet Members  
on their way to a meeting

*Quid est, Catulle?*

Quid est, Catulle? quid moraris emori?  
sella in curuli struma Nonius sedet,  
per consulatum peierat Vatinius:  
quid est, Catulle? quid moraris emori?

people coming out of church  
    conversing about the sermon  
    sniffing at the autumn air  
something in the papers about forces of popular opinion  
    and values which are unto our nation  
what is  
holding you back, Catullus?  
    why don't you go and die?  
the stalks of the potato-plants  
    are rotting fast this year  
    only October now  
                                    this evening away  
A boy comes out of the wood,  
    crossbow on his shoulder

*and goes on and has been going on*

in his famous History of the Revolution Trotsky recounts  
how Lenin  
when Lenin wore spectacles and a wig  
when it was raining  
in St Petersburg  
Mother Russia was giving birth  
to a child  
that was to become

when they've stopped serving drinks  
the customers have been chased away  
the chairs stacked up on the tables  
and the cashier is counting the take  
when you look at it all from outside  
and business is as usual  
and goes on and has been going on

that automobile looks worth a fortune and I am sheer  
darkness like an angel  
outflying the speed of its own light

*thought of a poem*

the parliament had been dissolved  
there would be pictures in the morning papers  
with President Kekkonen  
looking concerned  
and Finland shown on the map  
as a darker spot  
like a broken eye  
listening to the radio I thought of  
one summer morning  
walking through a park  
very early in the day on my way home  
having stayed up all night  
looked at the flowering shrubs the sun came up  
thought of a poem  
little green guns were guarding that sunrise  
no one in the street  
a poem about Berlin  
saying these verbs will be withdrawn from circulation  
to be used exclusively by right-wing radicals  
their trenches filling with water  
  
what is really  
going on?  
the air was warm that morning  
and it was like standing in a big room looking out the window

*boredom the greatest problem*

an open market economy and the right to say  
whatever one happens to say, the Western way  
I am talking, talking this long evening away

through the open window you can hear people talking  
the curtain flutters  
next to that birchtree the yellow bus-stop sign  
there they stand  
waiting

now you can get these shelters from Switzerland  
for about the same money as any good car  
if they would only combine the shelter with a car  
you wouldn't have to stay in the same place  
all the time

boredom the greatest problem  
in any shelter  
how could I make her happy  
get a new suit  
and a topcoat pure wool oh yes pure wool

how high do you think the real  
estate prices are going to get  
yes that one he held on to his summer-house  
for all it was worth  
the pinetrees are dying so close to the city

there was a woman in the bus whose mouth was like a buttonhole



*the new suburbs surrounded by woods*

the new suburbs surrounded by woods  
beautiful pawmarks  
of capitalism

the schools are closing today  
soon it will be Christmas  
they're selling trees for that purpose  
in the market  
the Vicar is masticating the Message  
there's not enough silence these days  
except in the churches

I lose myself in these corridors  
never reaching the heart

when you have lost it all, everything to be said  
has been said

I put my ear against the wall  
and listen to the slow  
erosion of concrete  
everybody is building shelters and vaults

*and what lies in between*

the conditions for life to begin  
the conditions for life to cease  
and what lies in between

one has to be able to think of it all  
get it all into focus  
turn fear into knowledge

those who lose their heads  
when the changes are slower than predicted  
those whose lives seem to pass in vain

in Nuremberg one night I suddenly knew  
no one had been executed  
all the verdicts were still to be carried out

radicalism and reaction  
two sides of one and the same  
such as buying and selling

went to the border of two great empires  
idols stood leaning against the rocks  
skirts and trinkets hung from the branches

not even in these times can gods be overthrown  
by simple onslaught  
the walls must be fortified first  
that they may crumble later

those whose eye sees the near and the far  
who make haste  
with deliberation and courage  
such as their day is their power

*September is followed by May*

the weather o it is fine  
her eyes are golden  
the wind blows promising spring for us all

under the eyelids  
there is a cool place  
the wind blows through the golden retinae

the apples are growing big  
the children are throwing apples through the tree  
September is followed by May for the second time this year

## *London Poem*

On what is now my news  
Went to Finland for a month, it didn't work, it is  
a little better here  
you don't have to be  
anybody or to conform to anything  
to anybody's anything  
you can own nothing, you don't have to strive  
for virtue  
ownership being the one and only virtue  
In Finland it didn't work, I was afraid  
they would all realise that I have no desire  
and no ability to acquire  
that virtue  
Here, it is a little better  
I can always point to the Far North and say  
there, there it lies  
my virtue, there  
I have an apartment a wife and children  
friends and opinions  
to influence public opinion  
there, I have I have  
pointing to the north I say, I have  
and sit here reading  
the Economist on 'how to expand'  
throw orange peels on the floor, sun shines  
a dusty windowpane and almost three o'clock  
in the disintegrating world  
all of us watching it go, not really caring  
I don't really care I light a Woodbine  
a woodbine is a woodbine  
and how is it with me here, am I happy  
what part of me, my fingers, toes  
my hair or teeth or that which has remained nameless  
since God was born of a virgin  
lost, cut off, cast in the mold of steeples  
Yes I am working  
serenely all day, not waiting  
but as I sense the endless, flat city all around me

I become restless  
I am waiting  
for the flowering of this city and all cities  
Take a walk  
underground, between trains  
see a woman combing her hair  
looking the way she does she won't change much  
A thought  
How could I ever  
really say  
anything  
at all

## *Making the Sun Run*

1

I'm in a fix.  
Surrounded by these so  
    socially useful  
    Animals . . .  
No matter what  
    I say or how.  
I'm in worse than a fix.

2

Light in a hostel window.  
Someone moves in the room.  
The houses' outlines dissolve in the fog.  
    Not much to see.  
Says 82-year-old Asberg the engineer,  
    Still, so much to do! and now  
        my eyes begin to fail. He observes  
the stars,  
    draws weather-charts.

3

Fall mists like an old man's gestures  
    drift.  
I walked the path that followed the curve of your smile.  
    Talked to men who died long ago.  
    This  
        was my work.

4

Worst,  
the nights. His self-pity  
dozing in daytime, in the ceremonial  
    folds of megalomania and plans  
wakes up:  
the images block out sleep.  
They swell to choke him

in the narrow room.

He would like to shatter himself, but instinct  
decayed into vanity, holds him back  
and his nostalgia-feelers vibrate  
away, from what feeble touchings.

He fears  
the little girl who makes the sun run  
at her bidding.

## 5

Sand tinkling, glass—or a revolution?  
Sparse landscape, and  
no talk.

Of the good times, the happy events  
and comings-together  
little is held  
in the mind.

## *Helsinki*

As I write this, in August, 1965, I know  
that this way of writing is becoming reduntant: soon  
I'll be unskilled again, unable  
to put myself into words, be Oudeis,

homing.

Or polytropos, unstable, much travelled, yet always  
Helsinki my City remains in my mind, in good order  
and when I am gone, it still moves like a tree,  
the leaves on a tree,

I sit in the Hansa Bar, watching the tree, how it moves,  
keeps moving,

in August,

the sun is setting, I watch it, thru the leaves,

and the lights going on

everywhere;

Helsinki, in good order, in my mind

it is beautiful.

I have tried many ways,

more than one stance,

almost losing my breath in their academies;

I have been the friend of so many, I have read the books

and now I am tired, want to retire for a while,

see other cultures, be an outsider, go to Athens,

city, gone forever,

talk to men, gone forever,

retire, having lost my skills,

be Oudeis, Odysseus, be gone

and return.

I have often thought of what went before,

when I was a small boy and surprised, had no language,

stood in front of a chest-of-drawers, reciting poems;

all of it terrified me, they told me to call it God,

that impenetrable fog,

did I believe in God: was I happy

standing there, in the fog, unable to see

anything at all?

Helsinki is the model of my mind,

everybody knows that our knowledge is still in its infancy,



I have learnt this city,

nothing is superfluous,

nothing is necessary,

I carry a bomb in my briefcase, I destroy Helsinki,

I resign, forget the past, the beautiful buildings,  
old streets;

if the people walking those streets do not think new thoughts  
they (the streets) are worthless and should be destroyed.

As I can't put myself into words,

being Oudeis, not skillful, not widely-travelled,

I am who was here, right here, all the time, this place:  
alone, stood in the fog,

died quietly,

shouted his shout, first to sell hats, then coffee,

killed with his long-bow,

met others, killed,

it is one and the same case history,

see, I walk down the road.

Climbed the stairs to the Tenho Bar

(‘well, going to school doesn’t seem to make them any wiser’, the doorman said),

it made the evening pass, I felt like dying

of Happiness and Helsinki; those who taught me  
didn't learn much.

I do remember: often I sat in the room next door  
and watched them, the others,  
turning, dancing around

what was my place, I was born there, it was mine,  
home-yard and window and flowers,  
always in flower, there, below  
the window.

ANSELM HOLLO

3 May 1967





